SEVENTEEN CROSSINGS

Seventeen bearers who crossed the Interior Seas alone,

wearing their vessels on their bodies as bright bloomed gardens

A companion novella to

THE LANGUAGE OF LIGHT

and to The Arks of the Interior Sea

Arranged and set down by Surjan

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INTRODUCTION

by Surjan

This book is a companion to two earlier ones. The first, The Arks of the Interior Sea, concerned certain civic buildings of Chicago and New York — arks, the scholarly voice of that account preferred — which turned out to be sentient ships, and which sailed once a spring along the long water-routes between the two cities. The second, The Language of Light, concerned ten docking stations of Manhattan and ten lighthouses of the Lakes, all painted in the cheerful yellow and pink of good municipal humor, who had fallen into correspondence across the continent and had been holding that correspondence up ever since. The first book was about community afloat. The second was about conversation between watchers. This book is about crossing — which, it turns out, is a third good thing, and not at all the lonely thing I had at first supposed it to be.

I did not set out, the spring I began this book, to write anything at all. I set out to look again at a series of seventeen portraits that had been standing on my desk for the better part of a winter, and to ask the portraits what they were about. The portraits showed single figures, each standing alone in a shipyard or at a waterfront, each wearing what I had on first looking called an inflatable garment — a vessel of soft bright pneumatic petals worn over an ordinary skirt or dress, with a dome at the head and a ruff of petals at the shoulders, and a great bloom of colour radiating outward from the bearer's body like a flower that had decided, one morning, to make itself visible to the person it belonged to. The portraits did not explain themselves at first. They simply stood, each in their frame, each alone, each looking out with an expression I could not quite read. But I had learned, by this point in my life, that expressions one cannot read are usually expressions that have not yet been listened to.

The word that arrived, on a fine April morning with the window open and the river bright below, was bloom. The figures were wearing blooms. The blooms were vessels, but not vessels of the arks-and-harbours kind. They were vessels of a different and gentler order. Each bloom was for one bearer. Each bearer, I came to understand, crossed the Interior Seas alone — not sorrowfully alone, not bereaved or exiled, but alone in the good working sense of that word, the way a person is alone when they set out early in the morning on a walk they have been looking forward to, or the way a bulb is alone in the ground before it flowers. And across the seventeen portraits I could see, faintly but clearly, the shape of a tradition — a tradition, I have since come to believe, of small patient joy made visible.

I call these seventeen, collectively, the travelers. The garments they wear I call their blooms, and the bearers who wear them are bloomed — the verb is passive in the private language of this book, and happy: one is bloomed, and then one crosses. The bloom is a vessel, yes, but it is also a kind of welcome. It says, to the bearer: here you are, at last, on the outside of yourself, and you are bright. It says to everyone else: this one is going somewhere, and their going is a good thing.

The voice of the book is not mine. I mean this in a specific way. I found, when I began to write, that the stories did not want to be told by a single narrator. They wanted to be told by a we — a community, a small lay people who lived beside the shipyards where the blooms are sewn, who had watched the travelers come

and go for many happy generations, and who had kept a record of what they had seen because they liked keeping records, and because they liked the travelers, and because the travelers, in going, left behind a kind of brightness that was easier to hold if someone wrote it down. I call this we the Tellers. The Tellers have never worn a bloom. They have only watched, and reported, and — where the reports disagreed — chosen the telling that honoured the traveler most, which is, in their practice, almost always the telling with the most light in it.

The travelers are each non-binary. This is not, within the tradition of the crossings, a remarkable fact; the Tellers do not mark it, nor do the travelers, nor do the stitchers of the yards, nor do the great bright lighthouses and docking stations of the Lakes and Manhattan, who watch the crossings from their respective distances and who consider the blooms, in their own architectural vocabulary, simply another cheerful form of vessel. It is the case that a person who wears a bloom is a person who has stepped out of certain categories that the surrounding world has constructed for the ordinary traffic of its business, and the bloom itself — by its flowering, by its ambiguity, by its refusal of silhouette in favour of volume — steps out of the categories of garment in a corresponding way. The two step out together. The bloom fits because the bearer fits the bloom. I want this said plainly at the front, so that the reader who needs to find themselves in these pages will find themselves early, and so that the reader who does not need to find themselves will understand, by the same token, that this is who the book is for, and that the welcome offered here is a wide one.

The setting of the book is the setting of its two companions. The shipyards lie along the Interior Seas — the Great Lakes, as the surveyors call them, though the Tellers prefer the older name because it better describes what the Lakes are, which is five interior seas held together by rivers. The waterfront is the waterfront of Manhattan, where the last seven of the seventeen crossings are made, and where the yellow-and-pink docking stations of The Language of Light keep their own watch along the esplanade. I have supplied, before the Catalogue of Portraits, a small affectionate map of the yards and the waters they look out over. The travelers and the buildings will, I think, forgive the geography for being approximate. Buildings forgive most things. Travelers, who carry their own geographies in the petals of their blooms, do not require a map to agree with theirs.

One small note, which I must repeat from the earlier book in case this one is read alone. The word arch appears, in one of the portraits, on a small embroidered stamp at the hem of a bloom. The stamp reads NOAH'S ARCH. The spelling is not a mistake. It is, the stitchers tell me, the older spelling, and they have kept it because an arch is a thing one passes through rather than a thing one is enclosed within. The travelers, they say, prefer the passing-through word. I pass this explanation on without adjudicating it, in the certainty that my readers will do with it what my readers do with all such things, which is to make of it what they please.

The book is short. It can be read in an afternoon. It was made to be read slowly, with the window open if you have a window, and with the colours of the blooms held gently in the mind. Each of the seventeen is a whole in itself, and the travelers, being solitary, do not require one another's company to be complete; they are glad, however, to be read in one another's company, since the reading places them — who in life did not often meet — in the soft adjacent rooms of a single kind attention.

Go well. Read slowly. The travelers did not hurry. Neither did the Tellers. Neither did I.

— Surjan, from the high window in Oswego, the one that faces the water

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the first seven

THE SHIPYARDS

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Chapter I

SERAFINE OF THE FOUR QUARTERS

Who stand in the meeting-place of their family's four colours, and who were loved in all of them

Serafine came to us in the spring, on a morning when the light had just begun to do its annual work of polishing the dust of the yard into gold. Their bloom was quartered — two panels of marigold yellow and two of pomegranate red, arranged so that the wearer, viewed head-on, stood in the exact meeting-place of the four colours. We know from those who had sat with them through the winter that the quartering was deliberate; Serafine had chosen it in long careful consultation with the stitchers, to signify that they had come to the yards from a family of four who had, in conference together, agreed to let them go. Two of the four, Serafine told the stitchers, were yellow people. Two were red people. Serafine had determined to wear all of them at once, and to stand in the middle of them, and to carry the four of them across.

The stitchers who sewed the bloom were, we are told, at first uncertain about the quartering. It is not common, in the ordinary practice of the yards, for a bearer to insist on a perfectly symmetrical division; most bearers permit some softening at the seams, some blending of the colours at their meeting-places, some small asymmetry that lets the bloom breathe without one colour fighting another. Serafine did not want softening. They wanted the four quarters sharp, the seams straight, and the meeting-place at the exact centre of their own body, so that standing inside the bloom they would be the place at which the four met. The stitchers, after some consultation among themselves, gave them what they had asked for. They said afterwards that it had been a harder bloom to sew than they had expected — straight seams require a particular steadiness of hand, and any small wobble shows — but they did not regret the work. They said Serafine had sat with them through the stitching with such quiet cheerful attention that the yard had felt, for those weeks, like a place where something useful was being finished.

The dome Serafine wore above the bloom was the ordinary yellow dome of the first crossing, and the pink-petalled collar was the ordinary pink-petalled collar, and beneath the bloom they wore a checked skirt of green and cream and a pair of brown boots that had belonged to someone they were glad to name. The boots had been their grandmother's, Serafine said — not one of the four, but an earlier traveler in their life who had walked long distances in them through a country very far from this one, and who had left them in Serafine's keeping on the understanding that good boots like to be used. The boots were older than Serafine. They fit. The bloom was for being, Serafine said; the boots were for walking; and between these two Serafine's whole day was accounted for.

They stood in the yard, on the morning we first saw them clearly, in front of two of the enormous pink hulls — larger than any hull we have since been permitted to see up close — and they greeted one of them with a small pat of the hand as they walked past. The hull, being a hull, did not reply; but across the yard, we noticed, Serafine smiled. One of the stitchers told us later that the hulls had come to know Serafine across the winter, and had grown fond of them in the slow considered way that large pneumatic forms grow fond of small patient ones. The hulls do not speak — not, at least, to us. But Serafine, patting them, had the air of someone saying thank you to a friend who had carried them through something.

We watched them for the whole of that morning. They did not move from their place between the hulls for more than an hour at a time. They stood in the meeting-place of their four quarters with the bearing of someone who had worked out, well in advance, where they were and where they were going. The light moved around them as the morning advanced. The yellow on the right-front and left-back caught the sun more clearly as the sun rose higher; the red on the left-front and right-back caught it in the afternoon. Serafine, we came to think, had chosen the quartering for this reason among others: no quarter of their bloom would go unvisited by the sun. Each of the four had been, in life, the whole of a person; each would have, across the day of Serafine's crossing, the whole of a light.

They crossed in the afternoon of the following day, into a bright soft wind off the water. The stitchers walked with them as far as the yard-gate and no further; a gathering of yard-workers paused at their work, not to applaud — the travelers are not applauded — but to mark the moment with the small quiet attention that is the yards' preferred form of honour. Serafine did not turn as they left. They had, we think, already turned inwardly, and what there was to see from the gate was a figure standing bright and quartered in their own light, moving out toward the water as if toward an appointment they had been looking forward to for some years.

A traveler at the edge of the Southern Bay reported, some months later, the passing of a small quartered figure on the far side of the water. The figure had been walking along a cheerful road in a cheerful small town, and had stopped briefly beside a doorway painted in precisely the red of one of the four quarters, and had laid a hand on the doorframe in the same small patting gesture with which they had greeted the hulls in the yard. Then the figure had walked on. We cannot be certain this was Serafine, and Serafine would not have wanted us to be certain. A crossing is a crossing. The far side is the far side, and it is, we have come to believe, a bright place. Serafine went well. The four quarters, we are told, are still held in balance; the stitchers' work has kept.

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Chapter II

HALOM OF THE PINK BOUGH

Who stood small and grand beside the great half-built hull, and gathered themselves gently into their bloom

Halom was smaller than Serafine, and younger, and their bloom was grander. We say grander because we do not have a better word. The colours of Halom's bloom — pink and yellow and pomegranate, in great round panels arranged like the segments of a melon — ran up from the hem to a collar of pink petals so broad and so softly pneumatic that Halom, standing at the centre of it, looked less like a wearer and more like the small bright interior of a much larger flower. They had the air of someone who had been placed, that morning, inside their own body for the first time — and who had found, to their pleasant surprise, that the body fit. They stood in it in the way a person stands in a kitchen they have just been given the keys to: looking around, pleased, taking note of where the cups are kept.

We know Halom's name because the stitcher who sewed the collar gave it to us one evening, smiling, with the small pride stitchers take in the names of the travelers they have fitted. Halom themselves did not speak much during the three days we watched them in the yard. They stood near the great half-built hull — a wooden one, still uncovered, scaffolding rising around it in a pale lattice — and they looked at the hull, and they looked at the sky, and they looked at the ground between their feet, and they looked at us when they chose to, which was not often. This was not shyness, or at least not shyness only. This was, we came to understand, the small discipline the older yards call the gathering.

The gathering is the bearer's own careful settling into their bloom. A bearer who is gathering is a bearer who is learning, across some days or weeks, how to stand inside their bloom without leaving any corner of themselves behind — so that the bloom, when it lifts and carries, carries the whole bearer and no leftover. Leftovers, the stitchers say, are not tragic. They are simply inefficient. A gathered bloom carries only its bearer. An ungathered bloom carries the bearer and whatever the bearer has not finished attending to, and the bloom, patient as it is, prefers the lighter load. Halom had elected the longer gathering. The stitchers did not hurry them. The yard did not hurry them. Even the half-built hull, whose own gathering was a matter of further months of planking, seemed to wait.

We noticed, on the second day, that Halom had begun to stand a little more inside the bloom than they had on the first. This is not a thing one can easily describe; the bearer does not visibly change position, and the bloom does not visibly shift around them. Something else changes. The space inside the bloom seems, across the gathering, to become more nearly the shape of the bearer. An observer of long practice can see this. We have, across our years of watching, come to see it reliably. We saw it clearly in Halom on the second day, and more clearly on the third, when the small round pink collar — which had been sitting, on the morning of the first day, a full half-inch above their shoulders — settled down at last onto the shoulders themselves, as if the bloom had finally agreed to share its warmth.

Halom crossed on the fourth morning at dawn, which is unusual; most travelers wait for the warmer hours of mid-morning, when the yard is busier and the light is more generous. Halom had asked the stitcher whether it would be permitted to go at dawn, and the stitcher had said of course, and had promised to rise

early and to look the other way so that the going would be Halom's own. This the stitcher did. What the stitcher did not know, and what we have since learned from a lake freighter that was passing at that hour, is that another friend looked the other way at dawn that morning also: Superia, the great pink lighthouse of Lake Superior, who had been watching Halom's preparations from eight hundred miles away through the slow correspondence of the network, extinguished their beam a full minute earlier than the schedule required, and did not look toward the eastern water until the minute had passed. A lighthouse's discretion is a gift that is rarely noticed. Halom, we like to think, noticed it all the same.

A sandal was found on the eastern side of the yard some days later. It was Halom's size. We do not report this as the evidence of anything in particular. A sandal is a sandal. Travelers sometimes shed one. We include it because the stitcher asked us to, and because the stitcher — who had sewn for many travelers and had not before kept an object from any of them — kept the sandal in a small wooden box beside her bench for the rest of her working life. She looked at it, she told us once, on the mornings when a new bearer came to her for a first fitting. The sandal reminded her, she said, that not every bearer wished to be watched, and that the honouring of this wish was part of what the sewing was for. It was, she added, a cheerful sandal. It had been nicely made.

Halom went well. A letter reached the yard in late summer, via the patient chain of gulls and freighters that carries such letters between the Lakes and the eastern coast, reporting that a small grand figure in a many-panelled bloom had been seen gathering wildflowers in a field beside a far harbour. The figure had gathered an armful of the pink and yellow flowers of late July, and had sat down with them in the grass, and had not seemed in any hurry to do anything more strenuous. The letter did not say the figure was Halom. It did not need to. The stitcher read the letter aloud to the sandal in its box and then closed the box and went on with her work.

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Chapter III

ORMUND OF THE LABELED HEM

Who carried four stamps at the hem of their bloom, and who had been welcomed in four yards, and who remembered each welcome with affection

Ormund's bloom was the colour of an orange at the moment of its first splitting. The pink pneumatic collar sat at the shoulders in the usual way, and the dome above was the red-and-pink dome of a bearer who had chosen to combine the two most common collar colours rather than select one. But what set Ormund's bloom apart, and what caused us to record their name rather than letting them pass into the general memory of the tradition, was the stamping at the hem.

The yard-stitchers, when they finish a bloom, stamp the hem with a small maker's mark — a simple square, usually orange or red, indicating which of the yards produced the bloom and in which season. Most blooms bear one such mark. Ormund's bore four. We counted. We were told that this was exceedingly rare and exceedingly cheerful: Ormund had visited four yards in the years before their crossing, and each yard had, at Ormund's polite request, added its stamp beside the stamps of the yards that had come before. The bloom was a travel-document. The bloom was a passport. Each stamp was a place Ormund had been permitted to stand, and each stamp was the evidence of a hospitality extended and accepted and remembered with warmth on both sides.

We asked Ormund, on the afternoon before the crossing, about the four yards. Ormund was wonderfully willing to speak of them. The first yard had been the yard of their first bloom-fitting, when they had been young and had not yet understood what a bloom was for. The stitcher there had fitted them patiently with a practice-bloom in marigold, and had sent them home with the bloom rolled up in brown paper and tied with a yellow string. Ormund had kept the string. They showed it to us, wound around two fingers, still yellow after all the years between. The second yard had been the yard where Ormund had seen their first crossing — not their own, but the crossing of an older bearer whom Ormund had met only once, but whose bearing across the small cheerful ceremony of that crossing had made Ormund understand that a crossing was a thing they themselves would someday make. The third yard had been the yard where Ormund had learned the etiquette of the stamps, and where the stitcher had, across a long summer, explained to them what each of the stamps signified and what the hems of the blooms had been doing across the centuries before Ormund was born. The fourth yard was the yard of the present bloom, where Ormund had come at last to be fitted with the bloom they would cross in. Four yards, four stamps, four different stitchers who had taken an interest in Ormund's continuing passage through the tradition.

We read, in the embroidery of the stamps, the words NOAH'S ARCH in orange letters, and we read them more than once, on more than one of Ormund's stamps. We do not know, in any final sense, what this means. We have asked. The stitchers say only that arch is the older spelling, and that the stamp uses the older spelling because the stamp is an old stamp, and because arches, unlike arks, are things one passes through rather than things one is enclosed within, and that the travelers prefer the passing-through word to the enclosed-within word. This is as close to an explanation as we have been given. We find it sufficient. It has the cheerful compactness of most of the best answers the yards give.

Ormund crossed on an afternoon of unusually strong light. The bloom, viewed at the moment of leaving, cast a shadow longer than the bloom itself, and the shadow — we are told by those present — held the bearer inside it for several long seconds after the bearer had begun to move. Ormund turned once, near the edge of the yard, and raised a hand in what we took to be a goodbye. Then Ormund walked on. A bloom of Ormund's colouring was reported at a far shore some weeks later, bearing four stamps at the hem and sitting, the reporter said, as if at rest after a long walk; and the figure inside it was writing, patiently, on a small folded square of paper, the address of a fifth yard they intended to visit next.

The fifth yard, when we heard of it, did not surprise us. Ormund was a person of welcomes. It was in their nature to add yards to their collection, and in the nature of the yards — the Tellers have come to believe — to accept such travelers gladly, and to stamp their hems with a small pride that is difficult to name but easy to recognize. Ormund went well. The four stamps, we are told, are still legible. The fifth, if it has been added, is by now a matter for Ormund alone.

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Chapter IV

MIRA OF THE SINGLE STAMP

Who came from one yard only, and who waited a long time for their bloom, and who bore the waiting as a kind of garden

Mira came to the yards from only one yard, and their bloom bore only one stamp, and they were proud of this in the particular cheerful way Mira had of being proud of things. Not all travelers are proud of the same things. Some take pride in having visited many yards; some in having visited none; Mira took pride in having come from one and only one, and in having stayed with that yard from the first sewing to the final stamping. Their bloom was predominantly yellow, with a central pink panel rising from the hem to the collar like a column of soft living stone, and the hem bore, at the front, the words NODS ARCH in a white-on-yellow stamp that we have seen on no other bloom before or since.

Mira had been at their yard since they were nineteen. They were, at the time of their crossing, not old — not yet thirty — but they had spent the greater part of the intervening decade in the single yard of their allegiance. They had done the small jobs a bearer does in the years of their preparation: swept, carried water, laid out fabric on the cutting tables, learned the particular tempers of the stitchers and adapted themselves to each. They had not yet, during those years, been sewn a bloom. They had been waiting. Waiting, in the practice of this particular yard, is considered a discipline; a bearer who waits for their bloom is thought to have had the better preparation for it. Mira had waited longer than most. Their bloom, when it was finally sewn, was the bloom of someone who had earned the patience the bloom required, and it sat upon them with the particular ease that long-earned things do.

We have been unable to establish whether NODS was a misprint, a yard we do not know, or a private shorthand between Mira and their stitcher. The stitcher — a woman of the first yard, small and round and given to long cheerful silences — declined to explain. She said only that Mira had asked for it, and that she had stamped it, and that it was not her business to inquire further. We honour her discretion by not inquiring further either. If a bloom bears a word the Tellers cannot decode, the bloom is not less a bloom for the undecodability. We record the word and leave it be. We have, since Mira's crossing, seen the word NODS once elsewhere — in the private notebook of an older stitcher of a different yard entirely, where it appeared as a notation in the margin beside a sketch of a hem — and when we asked her about it, she smiled and said she no longer remembered. Words between stitchers, like words between old friends, are permitted to grow their own small gardens and to keep their meanings to themselves.

Mira stood in the yard, on the morning of their crossing, in a light that we remember as slightly too bright. The sun was not yet high, but the white ground around them was reflecting more than it should have, and Mira — in their yellow bloom, with their orange dome and their pink-petalled collar — seemed for a few minutes to be not quite in the same visual register as the surroundings. It was as though the bloom had become, momentarily, its own source of light. We have seen this once or twice with other blooms; it is not rare but it is not common. The travelers, when it happens to them, do not remark on it. Mira did not remark on it either. They simply stood, in the slightly-too-bright light, and permitted the bloom to do what the bloom was doing, and smiled a small inward smile at whatever it was they were being told by the light.

Mira crossed at mid-morning. They walked past us without stopping. Their bloom was so large that we could not see their feet, and the single stamp faced forward at the hem like a small bright affirmation of exactly where they were from and precisely where they intended to remain faithful to. They did not turn. They did not wave. They went — and a gull, at the moment of their going, wheeled once above the yard and cried the particular clear cry that the yards have come to associate with successful departures. The stitcher, at her bench, heard the cry and smiled and went on sewing.

A rumour reached us, some seasons later, of a yellow bloom bearing the word NODS on its hem that had been seen at a far harbour we cannot name. The figure inside the bloom had opened a small shop, the rumour said — a shop for the repair of sails and the making of small cheerful embroidered things — and had set out, above the door, a wooden sign painted in yellow and pink. The rumour came from a single source and was not confirmed. We do not pass it on as fact. We pass it on because the stitcher, when we told her, nodded without looking up from her work, and said yes. That was all she said. Mira went well. The single stamp, we have no doubt, has multiplied in Mira's life into many small stamps of their own making, and the shop — if there is a shop — is by now full of them.

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Chapter V

YEVGENIA OF THE SLEEPING EYES

Who crossed with their eyes closed, from the good stillness of their own interior, and who saw the whole way

Yevgenia was the only traveler we saw with their eyes closed. They were not asleep. We watched them for most of a morning and their breathing was steady and their posture was the upright posture of a bearer standing at full attention, and a small smile sat at the corners of their mouth in the way small smiles do on the faces of people who are attending carefully to something pleasant; but their eyes were closed, and they remained closed, and we came to understand that this was how Yevgenia had chosen to cross.

Their bloom was a palette of yellow and pink in a shape we have come to call the double-round — two great soft spheres, one above and one below, joined at the waist by a short pleated section that permitted the bearer's body to stand at the centre without quite being visible. The collar was pink, the dome was orange, and the whole bloom bore, at the side, a white-lettered stamp we could not entirely read, which seemed to say NO H or NO M or NO HI depending on the angle of the light. We will not pretend to have deciphered it. The stamps, as we have noted, do not always yield to decipherment; and this one, we came to suspect, was a small cheerful wordplay whose full meaning Yevgenia was carrying, with the rest of themselves, interiorly.

Yevgenia's eyes remained closed through the whole of our observation. Their face was composed — not the face of a sleeper but the face of someone who had chosen, for a reason of their own, to conduct the good business of their crossing from behind their eyelids. We have heard, in our inquiries among the stitchers, that this is a recognised practice among a small minority of travelers, and that it is called the inward crossing. The inward crossing is not a lesser crossing. It is not a blind crossing. It is a crossing made from a particular interior stillness that the bearer, for reasons only the bearer knows, has chosen to carry across the water without visual distraction.

The stitchers who spoke with us about the inward crossing said that bearers who cross this way are often bearers who have spent a great deal of their lives being looked at, and who wish, on the day of their crossing, to be looked at without having to look back. The crossing, in this view, is an act of rest — a rest from the reciprocal labour of being a seen person who sees. The bearer closes their eyes not to refuse the world but to give themselves a small solitude inside the larger solitude of the bloom. The travelers, who are solitary by definition, are permitted — the stitchers say — a further inner solitude of this kind if they wish it. Not all bearers wish it. Those who do are, we are told, honoured by the yards in particular happy ways: they are not hurried, they are not asked questions, they are not approached in the hours before their crossings. The yard, for an inward bearer, grows a little quieter in the days of preparation. Yevgenia's yard had been happily quiet for a week, in the manner of a library at the beginning of a long rainy afternoon.

We do not know what Yevgenia saw behind their closed eyes. They did not tell the stitchers. The stitchers did not ask. When the hour of the crossing came, Yevgenia walked forward — with their eyes still closed — and the bloom carried them, as all blooms carry their bearers, along the path their feet had somehow learned in advance. They did not stumble. They did not hesitate. The small smile at the corners of their mouth did not change. We held our watching steady and we recorded what we saw, which was Yevgenia crossing with

their eyes closed, and we recorded what we could not see, which was everything Yevgenia was seeing inside themselves. The record, on both counts, is what we have. We are content with it.

A fisherman at the far edge of the eastern water, some days later, reported that he had seen a bloom of Yevgenia's colouring pass the horizon with its bearer's eyes closed. He had thought at first they were sleeping, and had called out; but the bloom had neither turned nor slowed, and the fisherman, in telling us, said that he had understood in that moment that he had seen something he was not meant to interrupt. He had returned to his nets, cheerfully. Yevgenia had gone on. The fisherman's wife, when he told the story at supper, said that she hoped the sleeper had been dreaming something kind. The fisherman said he was certain of it. Yevgenia, we believe, went well — and dreamed, on the far side of the water, exactly the dream they had set out to dream.

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Chapter VI

CAEL OF THE YELLOW BLOOM

Who grew up in a single colour, and carried it out into many more, and wept small cheerful tears on discovering the hidden ones

Cael wore, on the morning we saw them, a bloom almost entirely yellow. This was unusual. Most travelers come to the crossing in at least two colours — a yellow paired with a pomegranate, a pink paired with a marigold, a red paired with a pale rose — and we had not, in our records, seen a bloom of a single unrelieved hue before Cael's. We asked the stitcher. The stitcher said Cael had asked for only yellow, and had been asked three times whether they were sure, and had said yes each time, with a small happy laugh that got slightly happier with each repetition.

The reason, we learned afterwards, was that Cael had been raised in a household of a single colour. We will not say which household, because the household had asked not to be named, and the Tellers honour such requests. Cael had grown up inside one long yellow room. They had taken their meals at a yellow table. They had slept in a bed with yellow sheets. They had, for the whole of their childhood, lived inside a single colour — and they had come to the yard, this is the bright point of the story as Cael explained it to the stitcher, not to reject the colour but to carry it with them into a life that would eventually contain many colours. The bloom was, in a sense, a final tribute before departure. Cael was going to wear the colour out of the house it had been kept in, and out into the wide bright world, where it would have many new colours to make friends with.

The household, Cael told the stitcher in one of their longer afternoons together, had been a happy one. Cael did not wish the telling of their bloom to suggest that yellow had been the colour of a sorrow. The yellow had been, in its way, the colour of the particular kind of care their household had been capable of. It had been chosen, Cael said, by a person who had loved Cael very much and who had been able to love chiefly in a single colour; the yellow had been the most generous form that love had been able to take. Cael's life in the yellow room had therefore been a life inside a gift, and Cael had no intention of repaying the gift with anything other than more yellow, at first, and then — gradually, gently — with the other colours that the gift had prepared them for.

The bloom, we should say, was not uniformly yellow. A small red panel ran up the interior of the front, visible only when the bearer lifted their arms; a green panel lay hidden at the back of the collar; and the collar itself had four small coloured segments — red, green, pink, and a second yellow — arranged so that an observer walking around the bearer would see, at different angles, a series of small bright surprises beneath the prevailing colour. Cael wanted the colour to be a starting place, not a destination. The stitcher, who understood this, sewed the hidden colours herself.

The stitcher told us later that she had sewn the hidden colours across a period of several weeks, always in the early hours of the morning, when Cael was not yet in the yard. She had wanted Cael to discover them gradually, on their own, in the course of wearing the bloom across the days of their final preparation. Cael did. The red in the front interior was the first; Cael noticed it while reaching for something on a high shelf, and laughed aloud in the yard. The green in the collar was the second; Cael felt it with a hand when they were

settling the collar after a fitting, and stopped quite still for half a minute, feeling the green. The four small coloured segments in the collar itself were the last, and Cael noticed them only on the morning of the crossing, when the light caught the collar at a particular angle and each segment, in turn, showed itself. The stitcher told us that Cael had wept a little at seeing the last of the four — not from sorrow but from the good tender surprise of a gift one has not quite recognised was coming — and that they had not said anything. They had only wept; and then the weeping had stopped, and they had looked up and said thank you, and then they had been ready to cross.

Cael crossed on a Thursday. The light that morning was flat and grey, with a thin white sun somewhere behind a high even cloud-cover, and Cael's yellow bloom — the only strong colour in any direction — glowed so visibly in the dull light that the yard-workers stopped their work to watch. They did not applaud. The travelers are not applauded. They simply stopped, and watched, and returned to their work after Cael had passed, and several of them found themselves, that afternoon, uncharacteristically cheerful for no reason they could name. The yellow, the stitcher said later, had done what the yellow had been taught to do.

Cael went well. A letter reached us, some years later, from a town we had not previously heard of, written in a hand we did not recognise, describing a small yellow room in a new household where Cael was well, and was sewing, and had begun to work with many colours, and remembered the yard and the stitcher with affection. The letter was unsigned. We believe it was from Cael. We have kept it, and the stitcher, when we read it aloud to her, nodded steadily and did not stop sewing, which is the stitcher's particular form of deep contentment.

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Chapter VII

POMONA OF THE MANY PETALS

Who carried a grandmother's sixty-three years upon their twenty-six, and kissed each petal as it was sewn

Pomona's bloom had more petals than any bloom the Tellers had seen before. We counted them; we counted them again; we arrived, both times, at sixty-three. The stitcher confirmed that sixty-three was correct, and said that Pomona had requested the number because it was the age at which their grandmother had made her own great crossing — a crossing of the ordinary human kind, from one long life into whatever comes after — and because Pomona had determined, on beginning to consider their own bloom, that each petal would stand for one year of the grandmother's life. Pomona themselves were twenty-six. The bloom was therefore, in a sense, a garment of sixty-three happy years being worn by a bearer of twenty-six happy years. We noted this to the stitcher as a kind of mathematical tenderness. The stitcher nodded. She said it was a common way of building a bloom among those who had been loved well by a grandmother and wished to carry the grandmother's years forward into their own.

The petals themselves were small — smaller than the panels of an ordinary bloom — and arranged in three concentric tiers that radiated outward from Pomona's centre like the multiple-petal flowers of a peony or a dahlia. The topmost tier was a creamy yellow, the middle tier a soft rose-gold, and the lowest tier — which swept outward to a diameter greater than Pomona's own height — a deeper pomegranate. Pomona stood inside their sixty-three petals with the patient cheerful bearing of someone carrying an elder's life across a long water, as a person might carry a well-packed picnic across a long field, knowing it was going to be good when it got there.

We asked Pomona about the grandmother. Pomona said the grandmother had been a stitcher herself, in an earlier yard, and that she had sewn nothing that was less than loved. The petals, Pomona said, were loved. Each one had been sewn with the attention the grandmother would have given it. Pomona was not the stitcher of their own petals — that was not how the tradition worked — but they had sat beside the stitcher who sewed them for sixty-three days, one day for each petal, and had watched each petal take its shape, and had, on the evening of each day, pressed a small kiss to the completed petal before the stitcher put it aside.

The kissing of the petals was, the stitcher told us afterwards, the part of the sewing she remembered most clearly. Each evening, as the light in the yard began to fade, Pomona would come across to the stitcher's bench and look at the petal that had been sewn that day, and would take it in both hands, and would press their lips briefly to its centre, and would hand it back. The stitcher would accept the kissed petal and set it aside with the petals of the previous days, and the two of them would then sit together in the quiet of the emptying yard for a little while before Pomona returned to their lodging. The stitcher said they did not speak during these quiet sittings. There was, she said, nothing to speak about. The petal had been sewn; the petal had been kissed; the day was closing; the grandmother was being remembered with small daily affection. Words would have added nothing, and might have got in the way of the petal.

Pomona crossed on a warm afternoon at the end of the long spring. Their bloom moved, as they walked, with the slow rolling motion of a thing that had absorbed many kinds of air. The sixty-three petals shifted

against one another in a soft dry whispering that was, we are told, audible to the yard-workers from some distance. Several of the workers paused in their tasks to hear it. One of them, a rope-maker of many years' experience, said afterwards that the sound had reminded her of her own grandmother, who had taught her to braid ropes when she was very small, and who had always hummed while she worked. The rope-maker had not thought of her grandmother in some months; she thought of her now, kindly, and resumed her work with a slightly lighter hand. The bloom's whispering, it seemed, was the kind of whispering that encouraged such visits.

The bloom, we understand, was later disassembled at Pomona's request. Pomona wanted the petals returned to the earth — not the whole bloom, they had been clear, but the individual petals, one at a time, scattered at sites they had chosen in advance, each site a place in their grandmother's life that had mattered to the grandmother while she was alive. We do not know how many of the scatterings were completed. We know that at least several were: a petal of the creamy yellow tier was, some years later, found embedded in the soft ground of an orchard known to the grandmother's family, and was left there by the person who found it, who was not one of the Tellers but who understood, in the way some people understand such things, that the petal was where it had been meant to be. Pomona went well. The grandmother, by Pomona's account, continues to be well too, in the way grandmothers continue — through the kept petals, through the remembered humming, through the afternoons of their descendants' unhurried work.

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the middle three

THE THRESHOLDS

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Chapter VIII

ILARI OF THE RIBBON SASHES

Who carried a friend's pink ribbon across six years and then across the water, and wore it as four soft bows

Ilari's bloom was modest in scale compared with the greater blooms we have described, but it was distinguished by the ribbons. Pink ribbon sashes, four in number, ran from the collar down across the chest and the hips and the lower body, tied in small neat bows at the crossings. The ribbons had been cut from a single length of pink grosgrain that had belonged, Ilari told the stitcher, to a friend who had died before they could make their own crossing. Ilari had kept the ribbon in a drawer for six years. They had brought it to the yard in a plain brown envelope, and the stitcher had opened the envelope and laid the ribbon on the cutting table and had said, very softly and with great care, this is a good ribbon, and had begun to cut.

The six years during which Ilari had kept the ribbon were, we have been told, not a period of mourning in the ordinary heavy sense. Ilari had grieved the friend across the first year or two, yes; but by the fourth and fifth years the grief had settled into something quieter and warmer, less a sorrow than a companionship. The ribbon in the drawer had become, by then, a thing Ilari visited from time to time — not often, not with any particular schedule, but at certain hours when the friend came to mind and Ilari wished to hold something the friend had also held. The ribbon, across those years, had been held often enough that it retained, Ilari said, a faint familiar softness at the places where Ilari's fingers most often touched it. The stitcher, in cutting the ribbon, had asked Ilari which sections she should cut from; Ilari had pointed out the softened sections and had said, these. The four sashes of the bloom were all cut from the softened lengths. The harder unhandled portions of the ribbon were returned to Ilari in a smaller envelope, for Ilari to do with as they wished. Ilari kept those too. A ribbon has more work in it than one journey can exhaust.

The bloom itself was marigold and pomegranate in the customary arrangement, with a pink-petalled collar and a yellow dome, and the ribbons ran across it like the lines of a musical score across a page of written melody. Ilari's body, inside the bloom, was small and straight and quiet. They had the bearing of a person who had carried something for six years and was, on the day of their crossing, not laying it down but lifting it up — taking it along, showing it the water, letting the friend see at last what the friend had not lived to see.

The friend's name was not recorded in our notebooks. Ilari did not speak it aloud in our hearing, and the stitcher did not ask. A name that a bearer chooses not to speak aloud in the yard is a name that belongs, in the tradition, only to the bearer and to the one being carried. We have, in our record, left a small empty space where the name would have gone. The space has done its work, we think, as well as any name could have — it has given the friend the courtesy of not being catalogued, and has given Ilari the courtesy of keeping one thing for themselves.

Ilari crossed in the afternoon of a soft day. The ribbons lifted a little in the light wind of the waterfront. Each of the four bows held; none came undone. At the moment of Ilari's stepping out of the yard, a small length of ribbon — not one of the four sashes, but a separate piece, perhaps the stitcher's trimming — was seen to detach from somewhere in the bloom and rise on a thermal and drift eastward, and was not seen

again. Some of the Tellers have suggested that the rising ribbon was the friend, being taken along at last. Others have suggested that it was simply a piece of ribbon, enjoying the day. The tradition accommodates both readings, as it accommodates most things, with a smile.

Ilari went well. We know this with particular certainty, because a letter reached the yard some months later, carried by a gull that arrived one morning on the roof-beam and refused to leave until the letter had been read aloud. The letter was brief. It said that Ilari had arrived on the far side, and that Ilari had planted, in a small garden by a kind window, a single row of pink flowers — the exact pink of the ribbon — and that the flowers had taken, and were doing well, and that the friend, who was somewhere in the soft air of that garden, was said by Ilari to be pleased. The gull, after the letter had been read, flew away. The stitcher kept the letter on her bench for the rest of the summer.

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Chapter IX

TAVI OF THE GREAT ROUND SPHERE

Who asked for a garment not of silhouette but of volume, and whose two stitchers became friends across a winter of spheres

Of the seventeen, Tavi's bloom was the most nearly spherical. Where the ordinary bloom tapers toward the hem or flares at the shoulders, Tavi's was a great soft globe of yellow and pink — pink in a broad band at the top and deep yellow everywhere else — with the bearer standing at the exact centre, visible only from the waist up through a carefully shaped opening in the upper surface. Viewed from any direction, Tavi appeared to be emerging from the interior of a small bright planet. The effect was not comic. It was, we found, companionable in a way that small bright planets tend to be.

Tavi had asked the stitchers for the sphere because Tavi, they explained, had wanted to carry everything with them. Not everything they owned — travelers are not permitted much cargo, and Tavi would not have wished it otherwise — but everything they were. Tavi had a sense, they said, of themselves as occupying a volume rather than a silhouette. An ordinary bloom rendered a silhouette. A sphere rendered a volume. The stitcher, who had not previously sewn a sphere, spent three months learning to do it; she consulted with an older stitcher who had sewn spheres twice in her long career, and the two of them worked together through the winter to construct Tavi's.

The consultation between the two stitchers was, we are told, one of the small historical events of the yards. The older stitcher had not previously left her own yard to assist with a commission elsewhere, and she agreed to assist with Tavi's only because the younger stitcher had written her a letter explaining what Tavi wanted and why. The letter was long. It explained the theory of the sphere as a garment of volume rather than silhouette, and it included a drawing Tavi had made showing how the sphere should stand in relation to the bearer's body — the bearer not suspended inside the sphere but standing on the ground, with the sphere around them, the sphere's lower curve resting on the ground and permitting the bearer to walk. The older stitcher read the letter twice, we are told, and then packed a small bag and came to the younger stitcher's yard, where she stayed for the winter and taught her colleague the particular techniques required for a seamed sphere that would not collapse under its own pneumatic weight. The two stitchers, by the end of the winter, had become friends. They continue to write to each other in the manner of the buildings of the network — patiently, by any means available, including the slow wonderful post of the Great Lakes in summer.

The interior of the sphere was, we have been told, lined with soft wool in the colour of old paper. Tavi had wanted to stand inside a warm quiet space during the crossing, and the wool provided this. No other bearer we have recorded had an interior lining. We do not suggest that the lining became standard; it did not. Tavi's sphere was, in this as in all things, Tavi's and no one else's — which is how the yards prefer the blooms to be, each one the exact right shape for the exact right bearer, and none of them a copy of any other.

The crossing was long. Spheres, it turns out, move slowly. Tavi had been warned of this by the older stitcher and had accepted the warning with the equanimity of a person who had no objection to slowness. They set off in the early morning, while the yard was still quiet, and they rolled — we use the word rolled deliberately, because the sphere did move by a kind of controlled rolling, with Tavi walking inside it at its

centre — across the yard and out toward the waterfront. The yard-workers paused their work to watch. Some of them followed for a little way, at a respectful distance. The sphere did not pick up speed. It did not need to. Slowness, Tavi had long believed, was one of the good forms of motion, and they were at home in it.

Tavi reached the waterfront near midday. The sphere entered the water in the unhurried manner of a thing that had considered, in advance, the proper angle of entry. The sphere floated. Tavi floated inside it. The last we saw of Tavi, from the shore, was the pink upper band of the sphere catching the afternoon sun and becoming, at that distance, indistinguishable from any other bright object on the water. A lake freighter passing two days later reported seeing a round yellow-and-pink object drifting companionably in the wake of a flock of ducks; the freighter captain said the ducks had seemed to accept the sphere as one of their own, and had adjusted their formation to include it. We find this report delightful. Tavi went well, and was, we are given to understand, welcomed on the far shore by an older bearer who had crossed many years before in a bloom of a similar round shape, and who had been waiting for company.

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Chapter X

NESSA OF THE GOLDEN PLEATS

Who had been a dancer, and whose last dance was a slow bright walk across a yard of ordinary dust

Nessa's bloom was the most ornamental of the seventeen. It was built of long pleated panels in gold and pink and deep orange, radiating from a high yellow-green collar that rose behind the bearer's head like a fan. The pleats ran from the collar down to the hem and were each tacked at the waist so that the bloom would open, when Nessa walked, in a soft gathered rhythm that resembled, we have been told, the opening and closing of a very slow accordion. Nessa walked slowly. The bloom opened and closed slowly. The whole thing had the quality of a small cheerful ceremonial machine whose purpose was to make joy visible in the passage of the body across space.

We are given to understand that Nessa had been a dancer in their earlier life. The stitchers who sewed the bloom confirmed this; they said Nessa had come to the yard asking for a garment that would, when worn and walked in, produce a visible pattern of its own. The stitchers had at first not known how to respond; dancing was not, in their view, quite what a bloom was for. But Nessa had been persuasive, and Nessa had been patient, and the stitchers had, over a long winter, designed the pleats. It had taken three attempts. The first had flared too stiffly; the second had drooped. The third had the rhythm Nessa wanted, and Nessa had laughed on seeing it, and the stitchers — who did not often see a traveler laugh with pure delight — had laughed along, and the yard had been, for the whole of that afternoon, a place where something joyful had just been finished.

Nessa had danced, we learned, in a tradition we do not know the name of, in a city we have been asked not to name. The dancing had been, by all accounts, unusually fine — a kind of dancing that did not require them to leave the ground but that produced, through the movement of the dress alone, the appearance of flight. Nessa had danced for some twenty happy years. They had stopped, they told the stitchers, not because they had tired of dancing but because they had begun to feel that the dancing had completed itself — that the movement of the dress, across twenty years, had said what movement of a dress could say, and that they were ready to make the same kind of statement in a larger and slower medium. The bloom was that medium. The pleats were the final choreography. The slow walk across the yard and into the water was the last of the dances Nessa would perform, and it was a dance that required no audience; the yard-workers, in lining the path, were present at the dance but were not its purpose. The dance was its own purpose. It was the final bright sentence Nessa had to say in the language their body had been speaking.

Nessa crossed on a Tuesday in the middle of the year. The light was oblique and warm. They walked the length of the yard with the bloom opening and closing in its slow gathered rhythm, and the yard-workers — who had grown used to Nessa over the weeks of fittings and who were, each of them, quietly in love with the bloom — lined the path and watched them pass. No one spoke. The bloom made its quiet sound of pleats opening and closing, and Nessa moved within it like a dancer who had decided, late in a good life, that their final choreography would be a single long cheerful walk.

They reached the waterfront and did not stop. They continued walking. The bloom continued opening and closing. The water received them, and the bloom received the water, and the pleats — we are told — moved for a little while longer on the surface before the current took the whole bloom gently out. Nessa was seen, once, some hundred yards from shore, with the collar still visible above the water and the pleats still, unmistakably, opening and closing in their final small dance. Then the bloom rounded a bend in the current and was gone from our view, still pleating.

Nessa went well. The stitcher who had sewn the third successful bloom retired from the yard the following spring. She said she had sewn her best bloom, and that she did not wish to try to sew a better one. We have never argued with a stitcher's judgement on such matters. The retired stitcher now keeps bees. The honey from her hives, we are told, tastes faintly of pleats — a sweetness with a pattern in it, a taste that opens and closes as you hold it in your mouth. We had not thought honey could taste of pleats. It can.

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the last seven

THE WATERFRONT

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Chapter XI

JORUN OF THE TIGHT YARD

Who preferred the close-fit bloom, and carried their vessel rather than being carried, and who tidied the yard on their last evening

Jorun was of the middle yards — the yards where the blooms are sewn tightly, with less pneumatic generosity than at the earlier yards, and where the bearer stands close-packed within their own colours rather than radiating outward from them. The tight blooms are not worn by every bearer. Some find them confining. Jorun did not. Jorun had, they told the stitcher on the first day of their fitting, been waiting for a tight bloom their whole life.

The tight bloom is, in the taxonomy of the yards, an older form. It predates the great pneumatic blooms of the later tradition — the peonies, the spheres, the panoramic blooms — and it was once, we are told, the only form a bloom took. The early travelers wore tight blooms because the stitchers of the early yards had not yet developed the techniques required to produce the larger looser forms; when those techniques arrived, the tight bloom fell out of favour for a long time, and was worn only by bearers who, for reasons of tradition or temperament, preferred it. In recent generations the tight bloom has had a small cheerful revival. Some bearers, like Jorun, have come to understand that the tightness is not a reduction of the larger bloom but a different thing entirely — not less than the loose bloom, but more specifically what it is.

Jorun's bloom was predominantly red and yellow in the quartered arrangement, with a pink-petalled collar and a yellow dome, and the body of the bloom fit so closely to Jorun's form that an observer at a distance might have mistaken the bloom for an ordinary garment rather than a pneumatic vessel. This was the point. Jorun had not wished to be carried by their bloom. Jorun had wished to carry their bloom. The distinction, in the tradition, is small but real, and the stitchers honoured it; the bloom was sewn with the particular tightness Jorun had asked for and no tighter, and the stitchers checked, three times across the fitting, that the bloom remained comfortable, which it did. Jorun moved freely inside it. Jorun, in fact, moved more freely inside it than most bearers move inside their looser ones, and this is because Jorun had always moved efficiently, and the tight bloom was, for Jorun, a kind of permission to continue.

We watched Jorun for two days in the yard. They moved quickly, which the tight bloom permitted. They greeted other bearers with small nods. They helped a stitcher carry a load of fabric across the central path, and the stitcher was so astonished at being helped by a bloom-wearer that she forgot, for a moment, to say thank you. Jorun, who had noticed, nodded again and moved on. Jorun did not appear to require the thank-you. Jorun appeared to require, simply, the chance to help.

We watched Jorun also at the end of the second day, when the yard-workers had gone home and only a few of the stitchers remained at their benches. Jorun had, for an hour after the yard's closing, gone through the yard picking up small bits of stray thread and fabric from the ground — the small untidiness that accumulates in any working yard across the course of a day. No one had asked Jorun to do this. No one was watching, except us, whom Jorun had grown used to. Jorun picked up each bit of thread, pinched it in one hand until the hand was full, and then walked across to the nearest waste-barrel and dropped the handful in. They did this across the whole of the yard, and when they had finished the yard was cleaner than it had been

at any point in our observation. Then Jorun went to their lodging and, we presume, slept the sleep of the person who has left a place tidier than they found it, which is one of the world's better sleeps.

The crossing was fast. A tight bloom crosses quickly; this is in its nature. Jorun moved through the yard in the morning light, across the flat dry ground, past the great half-built hulls of the larger ships behind them, and out toward the water in a direct unornamented line that took, by the yard-workers' estimation, less than a quarter of an hour. Most crossings take longer. Jorun did not linger. Jorun had business. The business, Jorun had explained earlier, was on the other side.

A letter from an inland town reached us, some seasons later, describing a quiet figure in a tight red-and-yellow bloom who was helping to build a school. The letter said the figure did not speak much but was everywhere at once, and had a way of lifting heavy beams that suggested long practice with heavy things, and left the building site, each evening, a little tidier than they had found it. We have not needed to confirm the letter. Jorun went well, and continues to go well, and will go well for as long as there are things that need carrying — which, in our experience of the world, is forever.

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Chapter XII

EIRA OF THE QUARTERED VESSEL

Who asked for a grey panel to be sewn into their bloom, and who explained that grey was a colour, not a sadness, and was right

Eira's bloom was quartered, like Serafine's, but the quartering was of a different character. Where Serafine's was a simple division into two reds and two yellows representing four family members, Eira's was more intricate: one quarter yellow, one quarter pomegranate, one quarter dark green, and one quarter a deep soft grey — the only grey we have recorded in any bloom of any of the seventeen. The collar was the usual pink and red, the dome the usual yellow, but the body of the bloom refused the ordinary bright palette in its insistence on the fourth colour, which sat amid the others like a quiet friend at a cheerful table, present, content, not requiring attention but accepting it when offered.

We asked about the grey. Eira was forthcoming. The grey, they said, stood for a part of themselves that had not been bright, and that they had wished to carry into the crossing alongside the bright parts rather than leaving behind. The stitcher had been surprised by the request. She had asked whether Eira was sure. Eira had said yes. The stitcher had asked a second time. Eira had said yes again. On the third asking — the tradition permits three askings, for consequential requests — Eira had said that the grey was not a sadness but a colour, that the two were not the same, and that they would like the colour sewn in. The stitcher had sewn it in, carefully, with the same attention she gave the yellow and the pomegranate and the green.

The distinction Eira made — between sadness and a colour that might be mistaken for sadness — is one the tradition has had some happy trouble with, and has benefited from the troubling. The yards, in their ordinary practice, are places of bright colour. The stitchers work with yellows and pinks and pomegranates and oranges; greys and browns and dark greens are not, in the usual course, part of the palette. A bearer who requests such a colour sometimes causes the stitchers to worry that the bearer has not yet distinguished between the colour itself and the feelings the colour is associated with. The three askings are designed to give the bearer an opportunity to reconsider, if they have not fully thought the matter through. Eira had fully thought the matter through. Their grey was not a displacement of sorrow but a simple honest chromatic choice. Eira had made the choice. The stitcher had, on the third yes, accepted it without further asking, and had afterward said that the lesson of Eira's bloom was a lesson she was grateful to have learned: that the palette of the yards might be wider than the yards had previously imagined, and that grey, correctly understood, was a cheerful colour among other cheerful colours, and that the blooms could hold it.

The completed bloom was, we thought, the most honest bloom we had seen. This is not to say the other blooms were dishonest. It is to say that the other blooms tended to celebrate the bearer, while Eira's bloom described the bearer, and the description was warm. Eira had wanted to be described, not celebrated, and the grey panel gave the other three colours their particular carrying warmth, the way a bass note in a chord gives the upper notes somewhere to rest.

We watched Eira for a day and a half. They did not speak with us directly, but they were not avoiding us; they were simply at their own work, which seemed to consist largely of sitting quietly near the edge of the yard with the grey panel of their bloom facing the morning sun. They would sit for an hour; they would stand;

they would walk a short circuit and return to a slightly different position; they would sit again. At no point did they appear either impatient or at rest. They appeared to be doing the small steady work of being present inside a bloom that had been made to describe them, and of letting the bloom and the sun and the day do whatever they were doing together. Several times across those days Eira smiled — a small private smile, directed at no one — and on each occasion the stitcher, at her bench, smiled too, as if she had felt the smile arrive in her hands through the finished work.

Eira crossed at a quiet hour. There were fewer people in the yard than there had been for any of the preceding crossings, and the light was the ordinary indifferent light of a mid-morning that could have been any mid-morning. Eira walked without ceremony. The grey panel faced sideways as they walked, now visible, now hidden, and the yellow dome above caught the sun in the usual way. At the edge of the yard Eira paused, briefly, and pressed one hand to the grey panel — the only such gesture we have recorded from any of the seventeen — as if saying, very softly, you are still with me, yes, come along. Then they moved on.

We have heard since, from a cheerful house beside a cheerful wood, that Eira arrived, and that the grey panel arrived with them, and that a small room of the cheerful house is now painted in precisely that grey, with the yellow and the pomegranate and the green as trim. Eira, the reporter said, sits in the room in the mornings with a cup of tea, and thinks the thoughts the grey was built to hold, and is well. The Tellers had always thought Eira would be well. It is a particular gladness to have had the thought confirmed.

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Chapter XIII

OSIP OF THE YELLOW HULL

Who stood for three days in front of an unfinished ship they would not live to see completed, and named their proportion in it

Osip's bloom was not distinguished by anything we could easily name. It was yellow and pomegranate, in the ordinary quartering; the collar was the ordinary pink; the dome was the ordinary yellow. We searched, as we had searched with the earlier bearers, for the detail that would let us remember Osip. We did not find one at first. It was only on the third day of our watching that we realised the detail was not in the bloom. It was in the bloom's relation to the hull behind it.

Osip had chosen to stand, for the three days before their crossing, directly in front of the largest hull in the yard. The hull was wooden, unfinished, scaffolded on both sides, and it was being built — the yard-workers told us — for a voyage that would not take place for some years. Osip had not been assigned this position. Osip had selected it. They stood, each morning, at the same spot, with the hull rising behind them like the patient in-progress wall of a very slow cathedral, and they remained there through the working day, and they returned to it the next morning.

We could not at first understand what Osip was doing. On the second day we asked one of the stitchers. The stitcher considered the question and said that some travelers, before their crossings, wished to stand near something they would not live to see completed. Osip, she said, was one of those. The stitcher did not explain further. She did not need to.

We thought about the stitcher's phrase across the rest of that day and into the next. Some travelers wish to stand near something they will not live to see completed. The phrase sat in our minds and grew its own small cheerful complications. It was not, on the surface, a phrase that required explanation; every life, considered honestly, stands near many things it will not live to see completed. A garden planted in middle age; a building whose foundations are laid in one generation and whose roof is raised in another; a child still young; a book begun but unfinished. Osip had chosen one such thing — a hull, a specific hull, one that would sail only after Osip had crossed — and had stood near it for three days as a final affectionate acknowledgment. The acknowledgment was not of grief, we came to think. It was of proportion. Osip was reminding themselves, across those three days, of the shape of their own life relative to the shapes of the slower things around them, and was letting this proportion be visible to themselves, through their body, through their bloom, through the unfinished hull at their back. The proportion, we noticed, did not seem to trouble Osip. They looked at the hull, each morning, with the mild friendly gaze with which a person looks at a large project that is going well without them.

Osip crossed on the fourth morning. They did not turn, when they left the hull, to look back at it. They walked forward with the bearing of someone who had already done the looking-back they wished to do, and who had, in the doing, released the hull to its own further work. The hull remained where it was. The workers returned to building it. The building, we are told, continues, and continues well.

Osip went well. Some seasons later a yard-worker — not the stitcher, but one of the rope-makers who had watched Osip stand each morning — told us that she had come to think of the unfinished hull as Osip's

hull, and that she would, on the days she worked near it, say a small thing toward it in her mind. The small thing was, she said, not a prayer. It was a kind of pointing-out. She was pointing out, to the hull, that Osip had once stood there, and she was pointing out to Osip, wherever Osip was, that the hull was still being built. We thought this a fine use of the mind. We have, since, adopted the practice ourselves. The hull — and here is a thing we are glad to record — was launched in the autumn of the year the rope-maker retired. It sailed well. Somewhere, we like to believe, Osip heard of it, and was not surprised, and was pleased in their own mild particular way, the way a person is pleased to hear that a friend's long project has at last come good.

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Chapter XIV

ARDIS OF THE ROOFTOP

Who crossed from a platform built just for them, and who turned, at the last moment, to face the yard that had raised them

Ardis crossed from a rooftop. This was not traditional, but it was not difficult for the yards to accommodate. The yards open, along their eastern edges, onto the waterfront, and the crossings are, in the ordinary case, made at ground level, along the flat pale dust of the yard and out onto the water. Ardis requested — and the stitchers granted — a rooftop crossing. They wished, they said, to see the city across the water before they went. They did not wish to see the water first and the city after. They wished to have the city in their sight for the duration of the final minutes of the yard-side, so that the two places — the place they were leaving and the place they might be going — could be held together, just once, in a single bright view.

The stitchers assembled a small rooftop for Ardis. It was a simple wooden platform, some ten feet above the yard's dust, and it stood at the far eastern edge with its western railing facing the water. Ardis climbed the short ladder in their bloom — which was the yellow-and-pink bloom of an older yard, with a pink helmet and a long black knitted undershirt visible at the sleeves — and they stood on the platform for a good while, looking across the water at the distant skyline. The skyline was hazy that day. It looked less like a city and more like the suggestion of a city, a line of pale grey verticals against a paler grey sky. It was, Ardis said later to the stitcher, exactly the skyline they had been imagining all winter — which is the particular good fortune of travelers whose winters have been spent imagining a skyline accurately.

The assembling of the rooftop had taken the yard-workers the better part of a week. It was, as we have said, not a traditional construction; the yards did not, in the ordinary course, maintain rooftops for crossings. The platform had to be designed and built from scratch, using timbers that had been cut for another purpose and that the yard-workers had agreed to divert. The ladder had to be built to permit the ascent of a bearer in a bloom of Ardis's particular dimensions. The railing had to be high enough to prevent an accidental fall but low enough to permit an unobstructed view. The yard-workers managed all of this across five days of unhurried work. They had not been paid extra; they had undertaken it, the foreman told us, because a rooftop crossing was the kind of small unusual request that the yards were for. The yards existed, in the foreman's view, to accommodate the travelers. If a particular bearer required an unusual accommodation, the yard provided it. This was the theory. Ardis's rooftop was the theory made visible, and the theory, we are pleased to report, made a fine rooftop.

Ardis did not move for perhaps twenty minutes. Then they turned, slowly, and — here is the detail we most wish to record — they turned their back to the water. They did not cross by walking forward toward the city. They crossed by walking backward. They stepped off the platform with their face still turned toward the yard, and their bloom took them.

We did not, at the time, understand this. We thought at first that Ardis had lost their courage at the last moment, and had chosen to go without having to look at where they were going. But the stitchers, when we asked them, said this was not Ardis's meaning. Ardis, they said, had wished the last thing they saw to be the

yard. The city would come, the stitchers said, soon enough. Ardis had spent their whole life looking toward the city. They wanted a last full minute of looking at the place they had come from, the place that had given them the bloom, the place that had made them — in their phrase — themselves. The yard-workers, learning of this afterwards, were so touched that several of them sat down where they were standing, among the timbers of the disassembled rooftop, and did not resume their work for some time. Then they resumed it cheerfully. They had, they said, seen a thing worth seeing, and the seeing had put them in a good mood that lasted through the rest of the day.

We record the rooftop crossing because it is a way of crossing we had not thought of, and because a way of crossing that a Teller has not thought of is the kind of thing a Teller ought especially to record. Ardis went well, in whatever direction they were going. The hazy city, we are given to understand, resolved itself clearly as they approached, and was full of the colours Ardis had been expecting, and several colours Ardis had not been expecting, which turned out to be Ardis's favourites.

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Chapter XV

CLOVER OF THE LIFE RING

Whose bloom was a great yellow-and-pink ring, and who tied eighteen small knots by their own hand for eighteen small reasons

Clover's bloom was not a full bloom but a ring. A great yellow-and-pink ring of the kind a life-buoy might be, if a life-buoy had been enlarged to the scale of a small house and decorated at intervals with small yellow ribbons. Clover stood inside the ring, which reached from their waist to well above their head, and the ring — viewed from the front — framed the skyline behind them like the frame of a very simple cheerful painting.

Rings are rare in the tradition. We have recorded only three before Clover's: a red ring of the early yards, a white-and-blue ring of a yard no longer operating, and a third whose records have been misplaced and will, we hope, eventually turn up. A ring is sewn for a bearer who has, in the stitcher's phrase, already crossed something else. The ring signifies a second crossing: a crossing made by a bearer who has already, in some earlier part of their life, crossed a first kind of water, and is now preparing to cross a further kind. What the first water had been, in Clover's case, we did not learn. Clover did not explain and we did not ask. It was enough for us, and for Clover, and for the yard, that a first crossing had been made and survived and remembered.

The stitchers who sew rings are, we understand, a small particular subset of the stitchers of the yards. Not all stitchers will sew a ring; some hold that the ring is a specialised form requiring a training the ordinary stitcher does not have, and others hold that the ring is a form reserved for particular bearers whose circumstances the ordinary stitcher cannot fairly assess. Clover's stitcher was one of the few who would sew a ring. She had sewn, across her career, only two — both before Clover's. She was, we were told, in her late sixties at the time of Clover's commission, and had come out of a partial retirement to sew this third. She would not be sewing a fourth; Clover's ring would be her last. She did not say this to Clover, and Clover did not ask; but the other stitchers of the yard understood, and the yard-workers understood, and a certain warm attention attended the sewing that was not quite present at the sewing of the other blooms.

The yellow ribbons tied at intervals around the ring — eighteen of them, we counted — were each, the stitcher told us afterwards, tied by Clover's own hand. The stitcher had sewn the ring and had given it to Clover with the ribbons ready to be tied. Clover had tied each of them slowly, over the course of an afternoon, sitting in the yard with the ring laid out flat before them, naming — aloud, according to the stitcher, who had been permitted to witness — each of the eighteen as they were tied. The stitcher said she had not understood the names. They had been names of persons, she thought, or names of places, or names of things that had needed to be named and secured. Clover had tied each ribbon with a small precise double knot. None of the knots, to our knowledge, has since come undone.

The crossing was made on a day of clear strong light. The ring held Clover perfectly at its centre. The skyline behind, framed by the yellow circle, seemed to shimmer a little in the heat coming off the water. Clover stepped forward into the water with the ring around them, and the water received them, and the ring floated, and Clover floated within it. For a long time — longer than the watchers had thought possible — Clover and the ring remained visible at the centre of the harbour, neither advancing nor retreating, as though

held in place by some friendly quality of the water that the other crossings had not encountered. We have since learned, from certain of the Tellers' friends among the network of watching buildings, that the friendly quality of the water was not a coincidence. Batterina, the great yellow-and-pink docking station at the southern tip of Manhattan, had noticed Clover earlier that day and had sent, by the small means available to a building, a message along the esplanade to the currents themselves, asking them to rest a little while under the ring. The currents — who do not always listen but who listen often enough — had rested. Clover had floated. The ring had held.

Then — slowly, and without any apparent impetus — the ring began to move outward, and Clover with it. They went not toward the city but at an oblique angle, along the coast, in the direction of a distant shore we could not name but which, we have since learned, was exactly the shore Clover had meant to reach all along. We watched until the ring was a pale yellow dot on the horizon. Then we watched until it was a smaller dot. Then we watched the place where the dot had been. Clover went well. The eighteen small knots, we are told, are still tied, and the ring — which was kept, ashore, at the cheerful request of the people who received Clover — hangs now on the wall of a small harbour office, where eighteen small ribbons move very faintly whenever the door is opened.

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Chapter XVI

THISBE OF THE PANORAMIC SKIN

Whose bloom carried the image of the yard upon its own skin, and who became, in the carrying, a portable yard

Thisbe's bloom was the first of the new blooms — the blooms on which the shipyard itself appears, not as a label or a stamp but as a panoramic image inscribed upon the skin of the bloom. We do not know, even now, exactly how these images come to be there. The stitchers deny having printed them. The bearers deny having drawn them. The blooms, when shipped to the bearers, have been plain; when the bearers emerge from their blooms some days later, the images have appeared. The yard-workers call the images resemblances — not representations, not decorations, but resemblances: marks left by the bloom's own cheerful resemblance to the place it came from.

Thisbe's resemblance was the most fully developed of any we have recorded. The bloom — which was yellow and pink in the rounded conch shape of a great sleeping shell — bore, on its lower half, a long continuous panorama of the yard where it had been sewn. We could see, in the resemblance, the half-built hulls; the scaffolding; the stitchers at their tables; small figures of workers at their work; a red-stamped crate in the foreground; a procession of other bearers in their blooms passing along the far edge. The resemblance was not a drawing of the yard. It was, somehow, the yard itself — recorded in the bloom's skin the way a mirror records a face, but retained, long after the face has moved on. And the resemblance was warm. It was the yard as the yard liked to be, on a good day, in good light, with the work going well.

We have spoken, in our inquiries, with several stitchers and yard-workers about the phenomenon of resemblances. None of them have a full account. One stitcher has proposed that the resemblance is a consequence of long proximity — that a bloom left near a yard for many months absorbs the yard the way a cloth left in a smoky room absorbs the smoke — but this does not explain why some blooms, left for equal lengths of time near the same yard, do not develop resemblances, or why the resemblances that do develop are so fully detailed rather than blurred. Another stitcher has proposed that the bearer's own attention is a factor — that a bearer who looks with particular care at the yard of their preparation causes, through the looking, the yard to deposit itself upon the skin of the bloom the bearer is about to wear. This is, in its way, a more satisfying account, and it aligns with what certain of our friends among the docking stations of Manhattan have long maintained about their own attention and what it does to the weather. The Tellers have left the matter open. A resemblance is what happens. Why and how it happens are questions we have decided not to press. The travelers who wear resemblances seem, in any case, to accept them calmly, as though the appearance of the yard on the skin of their bloom were the ordinary result of the ordinary work of preparation, and as though to wonder about it would be to miss the point.

Thisbe themselves were small and dark-haired and stood inside the bloom with the quiet attention of someone aware of what they were carrying. They spoke very little. They were, we learned, carrying the yard with them. This was not metaphor. The yard — the particular yard where Thisbe had spent the three months of their bloom's preparation — was literally present in the skin of the bloom, and Thisbe was about to take it across the water, and would deliver it, in whatever form such deliveries take, to whatever destination lay on the other side. The bloom was a portable yard. Thisbe was its cheerful custodian.

We thought about this for a long time after Thisbe had crossed, and have continued to think about it since. What does it mean to carry a yard? The phrase is easy enough to say; its meaning is not easy to pin down. A yard is a place, and a place cannot ordinarily be carried. But a yard is also, in the tradition of the crossings, the location of a particular kind of work — the patient work of sewing, of fitting, of gathering, of the many small offices that prepare a bearer for a crossing — and work can, in a sense, be carried forward by the one who has received it. Thisbe, we came to think, was carrying not the physical yard but the work the yard had done, and the yard's own good opinion of itself, and the small cheerfulness the yard had felt on certain fine mornings during the sewing. Thisbe would arrive at whatever destination they were arriving at, and the yard's work would arrive with them, and the destination — we like to think — would be a little brighter for it.

The crossing was a rooftop crossing, like Ardis's before them. Thisbe stood at the edge of a roof with the city across the water, and the panorama on the bloom's skin reflected the city in its upper curve and the yard in its lower curve, so that — viewed from the right angle — Thisbe was simultaneously on the yard-side and on the city-side, with themselves at the junction. We had not seen this before. We have not seen it since. Thisbe stepped forward. The bloom took them. The yard went with them, inscribed in the bloom. The city, we are given to understand, received them — and received the yard, and put the yard gently down somewhere it could rest and be looked at — and Thisbe went well.

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Chapter XVII

ALMOND OF THE LAST CROSSING

Who carried the resemblance of an emptying yard, and whose light, at the last, was the colour of an almond held up against a warm pane

We come, at last, to Almond. We do not know why Almond is last in our sequence. The Tellers did not decide the order. The order was given by the arriving of the stories, and Almond's story arrived last. We have sometimes wondered whether Almond arranged this themselves — whether Almond, who had a reputation among the stitchers for a certain deliberate warm care with form, ensured that their story would come at the close. It would be like Almond, the stitchers say. We leave the matter open, cheerfully.

Almond's bloom was built in the shape of a great pink-and-yellow teardrop, with a yellow helmet at the top and the pink collar of an older yard, and the skin of the bloom bore — like Thisbe's — the panoramic resemblance of a shipyard. But Almond's resemblance was different in one respect. In Thisbe's, the yard had been rendered fully: the hulls, the workers, the stitchers, the crates. In Almond's, the yard was rendered but empty. The hulls were there; the scaffolding was there; the cranes were there; but no workers were visible, and no stitchers were at their tables, and no other bearers passed along the far edge. The yard in Almond's resemblance was a yard at rest, or a yard at closing-time, or a yard at the quiet end of a long good day.

Almond was, we understood, the last. The last of the seventeen we are describing; and — the stitchers have suggested, though we do not know this for certain — perhaps the last of the blooms from the yard Almond had come from. That yard was, we have been told, no longer building new ships, though it had not closed; it had entered what the stitchers call the long afternoon of a yard, the phase during which a yard does its own slow work of finishing and does not begin much more. The stitchers still sewed. The hulls in progress were still being completed. But the yard was sewing fewer blooms each year, and the blooms it sewed were, perhaps, the most attentively made of any in its history, as last things often are.

When Almond crossed, carrying the empty resemblance of the yard on the skin of their bloom, they carried also what the yard wished the yard to be remembered as being: capable, still; bright, still; sewing, still, in its own patient way. We find this moving. We also find it fitting. An afternoon, in the tradition, is not a failure. It is a shape declaring its own completeness in good time.

The closing and long afternoon of a yard, in the practice of the tradition, are not a single event but a slow cheerful process. A yard in its long afternoon does not announce itself; it simply, over months and years, does less, and does it beautifully. Fewer bearers come. Fewer blooms are commissioned. The stitchers, one by one, consider retirement, and some take it. The hulls that have been in progress reach whatever point of completion they are going to reach, and then they are either launched with a small quiet festival or are quietly left as monuments where they stand. The cranes are sold, or dismantled for parts, or left to weather in their own dignity. The yard-ground itself, across a long slow decade, returns to whatever it was before the yard was built — dust, ground, a flat place near water, and then perhaps a meadow, which is what the yard-ground often becomes when left alone. Almond's yard had been in this long slow process for some years before Almond's commission. The yard that appears on the skin of Almond's bloom is the yard as it was in the last fully working season of its existence — a yard already quieter than it had been, but still a yard, and still

capable of producing a bloom of the particular quality that Almond's bloom was. The emptiness of the resemblance is, in this sense, a kind of honesty, and a kind of cheerfulness. The yard had earned its afternoon.

Almond's crossing was made at the close of a long summer day. The light was the colour of an almond pressed against a pane of warm glass — a colour we had not had a name for until Almond's crossing, and which we have used, among the Tellers, ever since. The yard — the actual yard, around Almond, not the yard on the bloom — was quiet in the way all yards are quiet at that hour, and the yard-workers had gathered, without anyone having convened them, along the path Almond would take. There were more watchers than at any previous crossing. We ourselves were present; this is the only one of the seventeen we witnessed directly.

We have debated, among the Tellers, whether to include in this record the small observations we made as Almond approached the water. Some of us felt that such observations, being ours, were not the proper business of the Tellers, whose role is to record the bearers and not themselves. Others of us felt that Almond's was a special case — the last of the seventeen, the one crossing we had witnessed at first hand — and that the particular quality of our own presence at the crossing was something the record would be poorer for omitting. The second view prevailed, cheerfully. What we wish to record, therefore, is this: that as Almond approached the water, we felt, each of us separately, a small warm brightening of the attention that the work of watching requires. We had watched many crossings across many years. We had watched this one especially closely, because it was the seventeenth and because something about the gathering of the yard-workers had told us that a kind of good completion was being marked. We held our watching steady. We did not look away. We tried to do, as Almond approached the water, the small patient happy thing the Tellers exist to do.

Almond walked slowly. They did not speak. They did not wave — not because a wave would have been wrong, but because Almond's hands had been slightly busy that whole afternoon with a small gesture of their own, a small stitch in the air that no one but Almond could see but that Almond had been making for the whole length of the walk. They reached the water and continued. The teardrop bloom met the water and took on the colour of the water at its lower edge. Almond, inside, was visible for some minutes as a small steady cheerful figure, moving outward at a pace that did not vary. We watched. The light went from almond-colour to dusk. The bloom became, in the dimming, a paler teardrop than it had been, and then a bright teardrop again, for a moment, as the last of the sun caught the upper curve. We watched for a long time.

At a certain point we could no longer see the bloom. We continued to watch anyway. This, we have come to believe, is what the Tellers are for: to continue watching after the object of the watching has passed out of sight. We watched until the water and the sky were the same colour. Then we turned, and went back to our homes, and lit our lamps. On the far headland of the Interior Sea, eight hundred miles inland, we have since learned, Superia's light came on at the ordinary hour, and burned a little longer than usual. On the Battery esplanade, Batterina's portholes flickered once — a small flicker, no official signal, the sort of flicker only the Tellers' friends in the network would have noticed — in the direction the bloom had gone. Along the quiet coast, for as long as we could hold the thought, the whole weaving of lights that had been described in the earlier book was, for Almond's sake, at its brightest.

Almond went well.

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These are the seventeen. There are others; we believe there will always be others; the tradition of the crossings does not end with our particular telling of it. New bearers come to the yards. New blooms are sewn. New crossings are made. The Tellers, who have been at this work for longer than any of us can remember, will continue to tell what arrives to be told, and the yards — in their long afternoons and their bright new mornings — will continue to sew.

We close with a small practical note. If you, the reader, have found yourself recognising something in these seventeen stories — some small private quality of your own solitude, some small bright inflatable hope, some small patient knowledge that you, too, will at some hour make a crossing of your own — then the stories have done what they were meant to do. The travelers would be pleased. The Tellers are pleased. And we, the writers of this record, who have never worn a bloom, and who expect we never will, are, in the small quiet bright way of those who have been permitted to watch, pleased as well.

The companion map and the seventeen portraits appear in the Catalogue that follows the Afterword. A reader who has finished our telling and now wishes to see the travelers themselves — to find the quartering of Serafine's bloom and the grey panel of Eira's and the eighteen knotted ribbons of Clover's and the empty resemblance on the skin of Almond's — may turn there. The map is affectionate, not accurate. The portraits are, we think, honest.

Go well.

— The Tellers, in the small bright room above the yard, in the evening of an ordinary good day

AFTERWORD

by Surjan

You have finished the book. I hope it treated you kindly.

A few things I would like to say now, which I did not say in the Introduction and which could not have been said at the front.

The book began, as its older sibling The Language of Light began, with a series of images that had waited on my desk longer than they should have. They were portraits — each of a single figure, each standing alone in a shipyard or at a waterfront — and I had initially tried to write a prose account that would describe what each image showed in the ordinary way of describing images. The accounts kept refusing to cohere. They were accurate but they were not, as I could feel as I wrote them, what the images were asking for. The images were asking for something else. They were asking to be entered as persons rather than described as compositions, and to be heard rather than observed.

This was the small clarification I came to, across the spring of sitting with them: each portrait was not of an inflatable garment on a body but of a person wearing a vessel. The vessel was the outward shape of something the person had already been, inwardly, for some time. The vessel had been sewn to make the inward thing visible, and the visibility was a good thing — for the bearer, for the yard that had sewn it, for the watchers who gathered along the path of the crossing, and, I have come to believe, for the whole long weaving of the waters and the buildings and the small bright things that happen between them. Once I had understood this, the stories began to arrive — not as inventions of mine, exactly, but as the names and circumstances of the particular persons the images had been of all along. Serafine's four-colour quartering, Halom's quiet dawn, Ormund's four stamps, Pomona's sixty-three petals for a grandmother's sixty-three years, Eira's grey panel and its honest chromatic welcome, Clover's eighteen ribbons with their eighteen knots, Almond's empty resemblance of a yard in its long afternoon. I did not invent these details. I received them from the images by the slow simple happy process of looking long enough.

The tradition they belong to I do not have a particular name for. The travelers call what they do crossing; the stitchers call their work sewing; the yard-workers call the yards the yards. None of these call the whole a single thing. I have, in writing the book, resisted the impulse to supply a single name. A tradition that does not name itself is perhaps a tradition that understands itself too well to require the name. I have let the travelers be the travelers, and the work they do be the work they do, and have tried to describe both without forcing them into a collective noun they have not requested. The Tellers are the small lay community who have kept the travelers' history. None of this is research; all of it came from the looking.

I want to say something about solitude, because it is the word I kept running into across the writing and the word I kept, in the end, declining to let stand alone. The travelers are solitary. They cross alone. They do not, during the crossing, have companions. And yet the crossings are not lonely, and the book, for all its single figures, is not a lonely book. This is because solitude — when it is chosen, when it is gathered, when it is honoured by a yard and witnessed by a Teller and lit from far away by a friendly lighthouse — is one of the forms of community. The travelers are alone on the water and entirely, brightly, companioned in their

aloneness. The stitchers have companioned them. The yard has companioned them. The Tellers have companioned them. The great buildings of the two earlier books — the arks, the docking stations, the lighthouses — have companioned them from their respective watch-posts along the long coast. The reader companions them now. This is a kind of solitude that one can be glad of. I want it on record that this is the kind of solitude the book is about.

A word about the travelers as non-binary. As in The Language of Light, I wanted this to be plainly present in the book without being the subject of the book. The Tellers — who speak for the tradition — do not mark the non-binariness of the travelers as remarkable, because within the tradition it is not remarkable. It is simply the case. The bloom is what each bearer is. The bearer is what the bloom carries. The tradition does not use the terminology that the surrounding world has developed for gender variance, because the tradition does not need the terminology; it has the blooms, and the blooms do the work that the terminology, elsewhere, has had to do. The same is true of the buildings of the earlier book, who use they and them for one another not because they have discussed it but because this is, for them, the ordinary pronoun of an attentive companion. I hope this honours the non-binary readers who may come to this book looking for themselves. I hope, equally, that it honours the readers who have not thought much about any of this but who are willing to sit with the travelers for the length of a short book. The travelers would welcome both kinds of reader equally, and have, in the Tellers, a community that extends welcome in roughly that fashion.

A word about the setting and the map. The yards lie along the Interior Seas; the waterfront is Manhattan. This is the same geography the docking stations of The Language of Light stand upon and the same inland waters the lighthouses of that book light. The travelers move through a world that is already watched by the older, slower buildings of the earlier books. A reader who has met Batterina and Superia and the others will find them quietly present here, at the edges — Superia dimming their beam for Halom's dawn, Batterina asking the currents to rest a little under Clover's ring, the whole bright network brightening slightly at Almond's last crossing. A reader who has not met them will find that the world of this book still hangs together without the earlier acquaintance; but if anything here has charmed you, and you have not read the earlier books, I commend them. They are happier for having this one beside them, and this one is happier for having them.

A word about the map. It is affectionate, not accurate. I drew it — or rather the Tellers drew it, through me — in the colours the yards themselves would have chosen, which are the pinks and yellows of the blooms and the cream of the yard-dust and the pale blue of the Interior Seas in summer. The distances are not to scale. The dotted lines are approximate. The yards are, in truth, more scattered than the map shows, and the waterfront is, in truth, considerably longer. A map that tried to be accurate would not, I think, be a bloom-wearer's map. This one is.

A word, finally, about the word arch. The embroidered stamp on Ormund's bloom reads NOAH'S ARCH, and the stitchers explain this, within the book, as an older spelling preserved because an arch is a thing one passes through rather than a thing one is enclosed within. I did not set out to make a pun. The pun arrived at the same time as the stamp, and I have allowed it to stand because it says, in a single short word, something the travelers have always known: that the vessel is not a container but a passage, and the bearer is not its cargo but its walker, and the crossing is not a distance to be endured but a threshold to be crossed into

something better. An arch, not an ark. The travelers prefer the passing-through word. I have come, across the writing, to prefer it too.

Thank you for reading slowly. Thank you for sitting with the travelers. Thank you for caring, for a little while, about seventeen made-up persons with made-up names carrying made-up vessels across a made-up water. They are made up. They are also — in the way that any thing one has paid warm attention to becomes real — now a small part of the world. Thank you for being the reader who made them real. The travelers, I think, are glad to be seen.

The map and the seventeen portraits follow this page, in the order in which the stories have been told. I hope they treat you kindly in the looking, as I hope the stories treated you kindly in the reading.

Go well.

— Surjan, from the high window in Oswego, with the water still bright, still there, still patiently itself

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CATALOGUE OF PORTRAITS

with a small affectionate map of the yards and the waters they look out over

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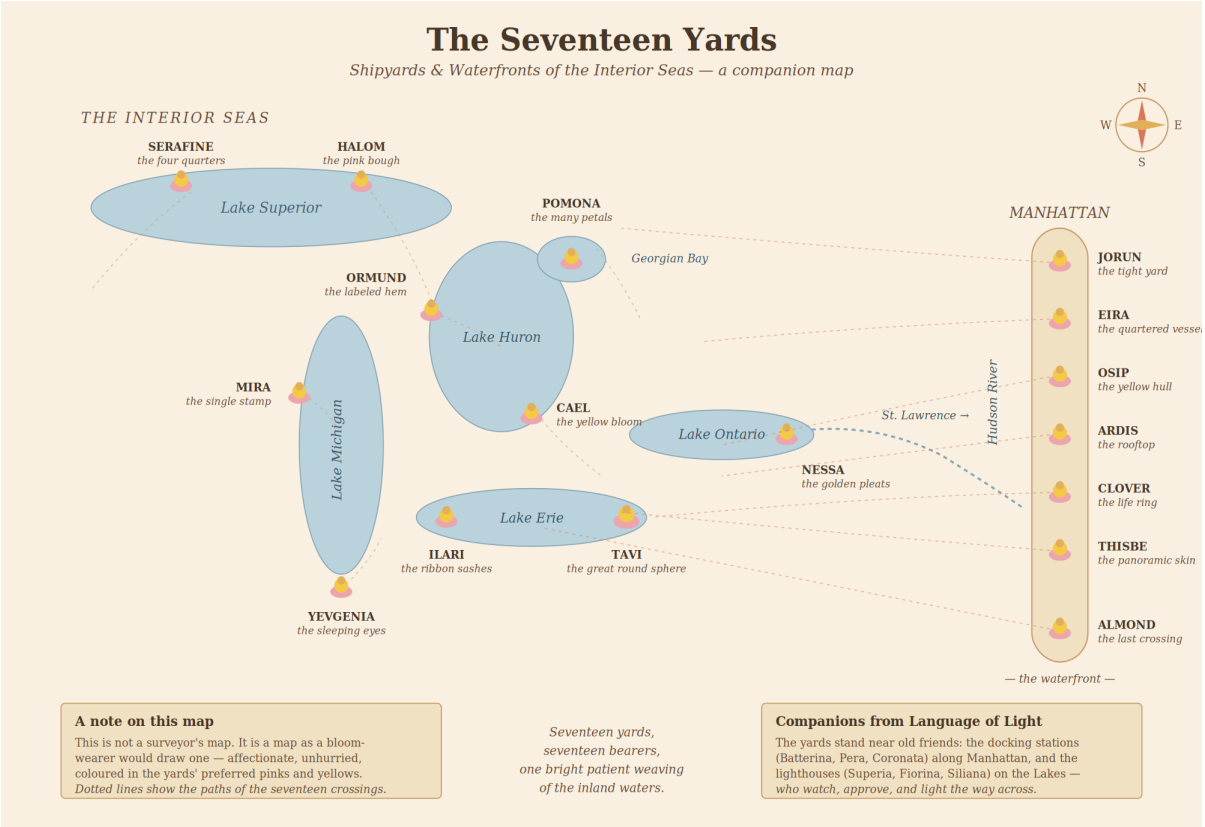
What follows is the visual record of the seventeen travelers whose stories comprise this book, preceded by a small affectionate map of the yards and the waters they look out over. The map is not a surveyor's map; it is a map as a bloom-wearer would draw one, coloured in the preferred pinks and yellows of the blooms, with dotted lines showing the paths of the seventeen crossings and the companions of the earlier book standing where they have always stood. After the map, the portraits appear one to a page, in the sequence of the chapters, with the bearer's name inscribed above. The portraits were made at various hours of various days, in various shipyards and at various waterfronts, and they have been gathered here — as the stories have been gathered — for the reader who wishes to see as well as to read. The travelers, who in the ordinary course of the tradition do not pose, have permitted the posing in this one respect: that a reader who has finished their stories may turn the page and find them standing, in their blooms, looking out.

The Seventeen Yards — A Companion Map



An affectionate map of the seventeen yards and the waterfront, coloured in the pinks and yellows the yards prefer. The distances are not to scale. Dotted lines show the seventeen crossings, and gentle companions from The Language of Light stand where they have always stood along the Interior Seas and Manhattan.

Portrait I

SERAFINE OF THE FOUR QUARTERS

Who stand in the meeting-place of their family's four colours, and who were loved in all of them

Portrait II

HALOM OF THE PINK BOUGH

Who stood small and grand beside the great half-built hull, and gathered themselves gently into their bloom

Portrait III

ORMUND OF THE LABELED HEM

Who carried four stamps at the hem of their bloom, and who had been welcomed in four yards, and who remembered each welcome with affection

Portrait IV

MIRA OF THE SINGLE STAMP

Who came from one yard only, and who waited a long time for their bloom, and who bore the waiting as a kind of garden

Portrait V

YEVGENIA OF THE SLEEPING EYES

Who crossed with their eyes closed, from the good stillness of their own interior, and who saw the whole way

Portrait VI

CAEL OF THE YELLOW BLOOM

Who grew up in a single colour, and carried it out into many more, and wept small cheerful tears on discovering the hidden ones

Portrait VII

POMONA OF THE MANY PETALS

Who carried a grandmother's sixty-three years upon their twenty-six, and kissed each petal as it was sewn

Portrait VIII

ILARI OF THE RIBBON SASHES

Who carried a friend's pink ribbon across six years and then across the water, and wore it as four soft bows

Portrait IX

TAVI OF THE GREAT ROUND SPHERE

Who asked for a garment not of silhouette but of volume, and whose two stitchers became friends across a winter of spheres

Portrait X

NESSA OF THE GOLDEN PLEATS

Who had been a dancer, and whose last dance was a slow bright walk across a yard of ordinary dust

Portrait XI

JORUN OF THE TIGHT YARD

Who preferred the close-fit bloom, and carried their vessel rather than being carried, and who tidied the yard on their last evening

Portrait XII

EIRA OF THE QUARTERED VESSEL

Who asked for a grey panel to be sewn into their bloom, and who explained that grey was a colour, not a sadness, and was right

Portrait XIII

OSIP OF THE YELLOW HULL

Who stood for three days in front of an unfinished ship they would not live to see completed, and named their proportion in it

Portrait XIV

ARDIS OF THE ROOFTOP

Who crossed from a platform built just for them, and who turned, at the last moment, to face the yard that had raised them

Portrait XV

CLOVER OF THE LIFE RING

Whose bloom was a great yellow-and-pink ring, and who tied eighteen small knots by their own hand for eighteen small reasons

Portrait XVI

THISBE OF THE PANORAMIC SKIN

Whose bloom carried the image of the yard upon its own skin, and who became, in the carrying, a portable yard

Portrait XVII

ALMOND OF THE LAST CROSSING

Who carried the resemblance of an emptying yard, and whose light, at the last, was the colour of an almond held up against a warm pane

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Colophon

This book was set in Garamond, on US Letter, with one-inch margins — in the same type and on the same paper as its older sibling, The Language of Light, so that the two may sit happily side by side on a shelf and confer, as books of this kind enjoy doing, in the small hours. It was composed in a small bright room in Oswego, New York, facing the water, in a spring and summer when the magnolias opened early and the geese arrived on schedule. The manuscript was read aloud in first draft to the author's companion, who made no formal comments but who, on several occasions, laid down their own book and listened, and who once, at the end of Almond's chapter, said only: good.

The seventeen portraits were selected, from among many available, by the author and by the Tellers together, in the hope that they would give the reader some small sense of the travelers described. The map was drawn in the colours the yards themselves would have chosen. The travelers, as any reader who has got this far will suspect, did not need either portraits or maps to be well; they are well without us, and always were. We are glad, however, to have been permitted to look.

Finis.

— Go well —